DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 931 FL 018 913

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TITLE Recognizing and Resolving ESL Problems in a Corporate Setting.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 23p.; In: Proceedings of the Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages and Communications for World Business and the Professions (8th, Ann Arbor, MI, March 30-April 1, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Communication; *Communication Problems; *Communication Skills; *Employees; *English (Second Language); *Inplant Programs; Native Speakers; *Phonology; Second Language Instruction; Syntax

ABSTRACT

A New York-based corporation found that communication difficulties between native and non-native English speakers were limiting company efficiency and were obstructing the professional progress of nonnative speakers who were otherwise competent employees. Phonology, especially intonation patterns made continuous discourse hard to grasp, while some employees had problems with simple word functions, such as articles and prepositions, that resulted in utterances lacking requisite precision. In order to address these problems the company organized an in-house program, consisting of eight weekly 3-hour sessions, aimed at improving the non-native English speakers' communication skills and educating them about English phonetics. Each session focused on specific phonological elements, such as diagnostics, stress and unstress, proper use of consonants, and stigmatized forms in oral and written English. After completion of the program, participants indicated that they had benefited significantly from the sessions and had developed a clearer understanding of English as a system of sounds and word order, and had an increased awareness of the contrasts between the way they used English and the expectations of native speakers. (JL)

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RECOGNIZING AND RESOLVING ESL PROBLEMS IN A CORPORATE SETTING

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Recognizing and Resolving ESL Problems in a Corporate Setting

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Companies located in major urban centers of the United States draw personnel from heterogeneous employee pools. Prospective employees may be well qualified to meet the written demands of the job description, but inadequate vis-à-vis its unwritten demands: fluency in the verbal code, Standard English, and fluency in the non-verbal code, the behaviors and protocols of interpersonal and organizational communication. In-house training programs, normally built on the presumption of a monolingual, homogeneous employee pool, may need to adapt to the special needs and problems presented by current urban demographics.

This article describes the approach of a company which sought to identify and confront language- and culture-related problems within the organization. Management consulted the author, a college teacher of oral communication theory and skills for non-native speakers of English in the student population, who as a researcher is investigating the problems faced by English-speaking listeners in decoding the messages of ESL (English as a Second Lanugage) speakers. In other words, this article attempts to synthesize real-world experience and theoretical concerns.

Regarding those concerns, theoreticians in adult second language acquisition (SLA) have been defining the nature of interlanguage, first described by Selinker (1972) as a code developing along a continuum from an individual's native language towards a "target" language, in which a learner could conceivably reach "near-native" proficiency.

Theoretical formulations have emerged, including the monitor model (Krashen 1977) with its corollary, the input hypothesis, positing that a second language is not learned in a classroom but acquired in life situations, where comprehensible input is processed and transformed by the learner into the corpus of language which he ultimately produces in communication.

Regarding unschooled language acquisition, Schumann (1978) proposes a culture-contact model, called the pidginization hypothesis, positing that the uninstructed learner will pidginize to create his interlanguage, proceeding along the continuum only as far as he needs to do in order to function in the new culture without undertaking to assimilate. Other theories, such as Giles' (1981) accommodation theory, and Brown's (1980) optimal distance model, reflect the impact of social psychology on an understanding of SLA processes. Implicit in these and other important formulations is a process model of interpersonal communication, encompassing the behaviors of both senders and receivers of messages. However, their focus is on what the second-language learner does, without specific attention to the behaviors of that learner's interlocutors in the target milieu, even though those behaviors, perceived either overtly or subliminally, go far in shaping the language-learner's performance.

Vygotsky (1962) has made explicit the social nature of language itself, arguing that human beings acquire their native tongues, their first languages, by the internalization of heard dialogues into inner speech and thought. Bakhtin (1981) tells us that "language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other...", so that "the word, in language, is half someone else's..." (p. 293). Thus, the cruciality of the Other, the power of the receiver to determine the ways in which the sender formulates and encodes his messages, is recognized at more than one theoretical level. This very recognition illuminates a void in the research: the light shines on work not done, work with receivers of second-language messages. If we can infer that talk is a consequence of situations created by interlocutors in various circumstances, and that language is produced in order to get response, or in response to prior language, we can apply this inference readily to the way in which a second-language learner builds his interlanguage.

We need to know more than we do about what listeners do. We need to know how listerers hear, perceive, select, and react to the messages of ESL

communicators. We need to look at natives of the target culture as they listen to speakers of interlanguage, so that we can gain understanding of the listener's endeavor. Through awareness of the "mainstream" listener's struggle, in inter-lingual, cross-cultural, interpersonal communication, we may be able to enlarge our capacities as teachers and facilitators of effective communication.

So, this researcher has been looking at listeners and reflecting on the difficulties they face when decoding the messages of ESL speakers, and on ways in which those difficulties can be eased by helping speakers to meet the norms and expectations of the mainstream. In a study conducted at Lehman College, I have been examining via videotape the reactions of native- and near-native English-speaking college students to the speech of ESL students, their peers at Lehman. With this research in progress, an opportunity fortuitously arose for me to extend the scope of my inquiry beyond the academic setting. An invitation came from a New York-based company, an international firm under British ownership with more than three hundred employees in New York, to analyze and suggest remedies for what management perceived as an in-house problem with language and communication. The invitation provided me with an opportunity to observe and record the ways in which the non-native English of employees at various levels in the corporate structure was affecting their immediate situations, their prospects, and the operations of the company as a whole.

The Company, a division of a larger organization, is in the business of selling travelers' cheques. It is a service company, not a manufacturer, yet it has a product to sell. Its basic divisions, aside from an overall personnel department, include finance, sales and customer service, and data-processing, with various sub-divisions. For the Company to operate normally, effective communication needs to take place between individuals, among departments, with banks and agents, and of course, with customers. The Company owes its existence to international travel; diversity is a normal element in its infrastructure.

Despite this international orientation, the president of the company cited language difference as a problem within the New York office.

This distress signal must be heard in the context of the current urban scene in the U.S. Demographic diversity in New York and other cities means that the employee pool available to local corporations is likely to be heterogeneous and multilingual. The prevalence of fluent Standard English as the medium of communication at all levels in a business office can no longer be taken for granted. Even at the supervisory and managerial levels, situations arise in which an employee's ability to communicate effectively in Standard English may supersede job competence as a factor in retention and promotion. This means that in some companies job-related capabilities are not sufficient for progress; perceived proficiency in English may be regarded as the sine qua non of upward mobility in the company and the business community, as well as in the host culture at large. In fact, when we take into account the imminent advent of computers which will be activated by human speech, we can appreciate that the problems of ESL/D speakers who seek success in corporate America are likely to be compounded in the areas of both interpersonal and extrapersonal communication.

Whether or not we shall be able to query listener-computers on their reactions to the speech of ESL speakers remains to be seen, but certainly the reactions of human listeners are available.

Believing that we can most productively investigate the perception and evaluation of non-native speech not by consulting language-wise people, such as second-language theoreticians and practitioners, but by consulting the naive listeners of the real world, I decided to begin my ethnographic research as a non-participant observer in the business world by talking to the "mainstream" people who had been registering complaints at the message-receiving end. In order to optimize the input that I would receive, a general theoretical framework would be needed, and I made my rationale explicit.

General framework

It is axiomatic in communication theory that the meaning of any message is the joint construction of the one who sends it out, in speech or writing, and the one who receives, interprets, and reacts to it. No statement has meaning until it has been responded to and the sender can perceive from the feedback he gets that the listener has grasped his intention. This doesn't mean that the feedback must be positive - a listener can certainly disagree with a statement - but the feedback must be apposite, connected to the message, if the communication is to proceed. Language does most of the work of getting intentions into communicable form, and of getting reactions to other people's messages into communicable form too. Of course, language isn't the only code we use, non-verbal behavior is a powerful medium; still, language is the code that we can use with maximum precision and accountability.

We all know from extensive and valid experience that communicators who share the same mother tongue often run into problems related to language. English speakers do not always agree on the connotations of a word or the interpretations of discourse. What was of concern here is what happens when non-native speakers of English interact with each other and with native speakers, and how the potential of understanding or misunderstanding is affected by language difference.

Meeting managers

The first task was to get input from some of Company's managers and executives on the ways in which they thought language use or misuse at the employee level was affecting the company's operations. Management's interest in looking into this situation seemed to indicate a quite sophisticated view of the significance of basic communication skills in corporate undertakings. By this I mean that although public speaking and presentation skills have long been recognized as important, it takes unusually sharp perception to acknowledge that so-called ordinary, day-to-day, inter-personal, inter-departmental, and company-customer

communication demand skills beyond those associated with getting specific work done. Expanding these perceptions, management would need to elaborate the problem as they saw it. By being as specific as possible in describing situations and giving examples, they would contribute to a useful analysis of the problem, and would make the ultimate recommendations relevant to their stated and felt needs. A questionnaire previously circulated by a consultant had elicited the information that managers saw some of their subordinates as having poor language skills. I needed to get the configuration of that description: what did "poor language skills" look like, or sound like? A survey would seek specifics.

Sometimes problems in communication which are attributed to language are actually related to other phenomena, such as cultural contrasts (i.e. different ways of behaving, as in modes of eye contact, posture, gesture, notions of when and with whom to speak, etc.) However, once we acknowledge that language per se is at the heart of the matter, we need to be as specific as possible in locating trouble spots. In referring to an individual's "poor language skills" are we talking about phonology (articulation, pronunciation), syntax (grammar, word order), or lexicon (vocabulary: denotations, connotations)? Once it is decided that an individual's articulation of Standard English is implicated, is the problem one of intonation (putting the accent on the right syllable and stringing the words together according to the rules of the dialect), or making the necessary sounds (teeth or teet')? When there is a complaint about a speaker's intelligibility, is the problem in his comprehensibility (being basically decipherable), in his acceptability (being correct), or in the fact that his speech is irritating, capable of arousing feelings of frustration and distaste? None of these negative attributes would mean that an employee was not a competent, respectable, likeable, utterly worthy person, but any of them might mean that working with him would be a drag (colloquial, not acceptable in this paper.)

Company people, untrained in the study of language and totally unfamiliar with sociolinguistic theory, would not be able to phrase their descriptions in

the vocabulary of linguistics, but they would enable me to formulate a probable picture of the problem, to be more accurately delineated through contact with the speakers in question, later on. Thus, I spent a day meeting with middle- and upper-level managers and executives from various departments; the Vice President of Personnel, harboring the concern expressed by the President of the company, participated too.

It became apparent at once that despite their high levels of education, the company executives tripped over what many of us consider ordinary terms, and we proceeded to define the following items:

1. native speaker (NS): user of a mother tongue;

2. non-native speaker (NNS): user of an acquired language;

3. ESL: English as a second language, i.e. the use of English, in an anglophone (English-speaking) country, by a NNS.

4. SESD: Standard English as a second dialect (not only a new term, but an entirely new concept to everyone in the management group;)

5. receptive competence: ability to comprehend a spoken language;

6. productive competence: ability to speak a given language;

7. fossilized language: language which contains many deeply-rooted errors or non-Standard forms, in comparison to the native Standard dialect.

In the course of discussion, it was revealed that the managers believed that work was getting done, that the employees were generally conscientious and capable, and that language problems tended not to block productivity altogether, but to diminish it. The participants voiced concern for the efficiency of operations, the welfare of the company, and the well-being of their respective staffs. A total of thirty managers and executives had responded to a questionnaire circulated prior to the meetings. This questionnaire was not prepared by me, but I had asked the preparers to encourage respondents to be reflective in their responses, to cite specific instances, and to tie their observations to the realities of work. It is important to note that in examining language use, no observation is trivial because a useful analysis is based on

the reality of interaction, and not on abstract or theoretical considerations. Following are comments made by participants at the meetings and by respondents to the questionnaire who did not attend the sessions. The comments are not listed in order of importance; establishing priorities would come later.

ESL/SESD language variations at Company were resulting in:

- inability of some employees to give out information;
- the need for repetition of instructions to employees;
- inadequate comprehension of job requirements;
- failure to receive/transmit information on the telephone;
- inaccurate or incomplete telephone messages;
- excessive reticence, sometimes unwillingness to speak at all;
- failure to ask questions, thus incomplete comprehension;
- self-exclusion from departmental conversations and discussions;
- impossibility of promoting otherwise qualified persons;
- secretarial errors based on incomplete knowledge of English;
- failure to follow stated procedures;
- unsatisfactory improvisation of solutions to problems;
- need of managers to simplify tasks and procedures;
- risk of antagonizing customers;
- belief of some managers that some employees are misplaced;
- sub rosa "networking" among same-language speakers, creating ad hoc intermediaries;
- absence of social interaction between NSs and NNSs, resulting in cliques, enclaves, and insider/outsider status among employees;
- difficulty in learning and using the names of personnel at all levels;
- strained relations among managers, due to the use of poor communicators for liaison and errand-running;
- poorly-transmitted requisitions (hard to fill);
- misunderstanding of company policy, even of benefits;
- need to screen letters before dispatching them.

Many of the problems mentioned confirmed my expectations; some, underlined above, indicated a subtle potential for demoralization, the ephemeral but powerful factors of communication apprehension and endangered self-esteem. Some long-range consequences of the immediate problems were thus suggested:

1. The continuing waste of time and effort, due to the need for checking, re-checking, and re-doing work.

2. The erosion of self-confidence among capable, but hard-to-talk-to speakers.

3. The risk of interpersonal or inter-departmental irritation hardening into resentment.

4. The emergence of a two-track employee development system, with upward

movement reserved to "promotable" people, and immutable status for "linguistically-unpromotable" people, i.e. a de facto in-house caste system.

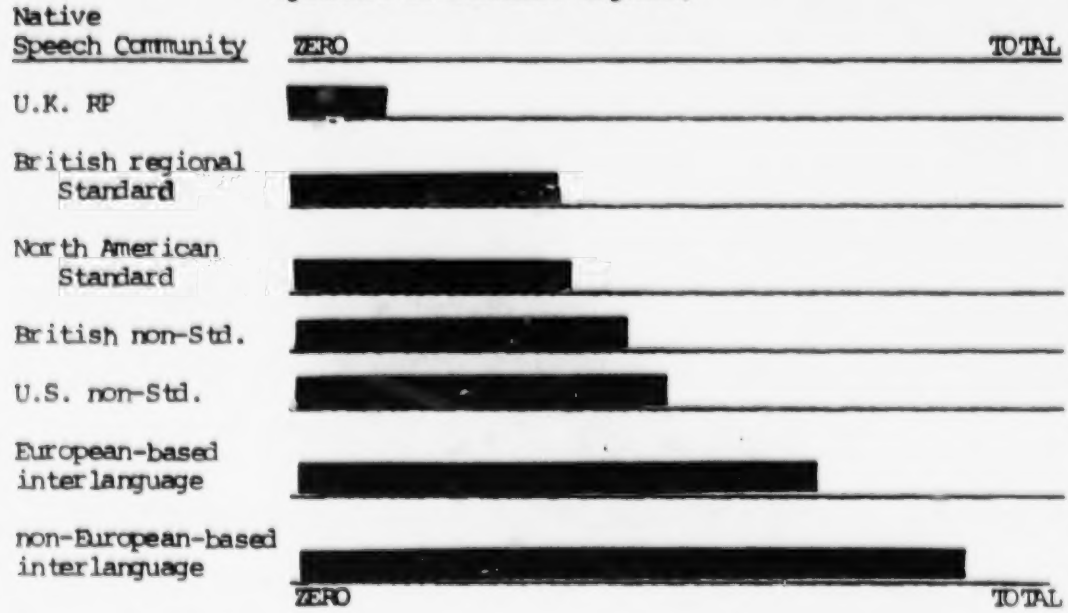
An important sociolinguistic factor in the situation was the fact that the President of the company is English, as are a number of top-level people in the corporate hierarchy, although others, such as the Vice President of Personnel, are Americans. In view of unstated, but tacitly acknowledged feelings among English speakers toward major varieties of Standard English, i.e. regional varieties, I would posit a differential burden of communicative responsibility on individuals participating in interpersonal communication in the English language. By communicative responsibility I refer to the obligation of a speaker to make himself intelligible to a listener, and the obligation of a listener to comprehend the message of a speaker. I am risking a digression here, interpolating this notion of the BC_R (Burden of Communicative Responsibility), because I want to make the point that the burden falls unequally on communicators, depending on their native-language speech communities. In interlingual and intercultural communication, the nature of the ESL speaker's interlanguage conditions the weight of the BCR he bears vis-à-vis an English-speaking interlocutor.

Let's say that the BCR operates on a scale of zero communicative responsibility to total CR, and let's say too that the concept of interpersonal communication as a dynamic, circular process does not permit either sender or receiver to have either zero or total responsibility for the successful outcome of a transaction. Nevertheless, the styles or registers of the individual communicators can generate an imbalance which is code-based. Thus, the speaker whose native tongue is non-European and whose English interlanguage is obviously influenced by his native tongue, is likely to feel within himself, and to be made to feel by his interlocutor, a near-total burden of responsibility both for being understood and for comprehending the Other. At the other end of the scale, the native speaker of U.K. RP (Received Pronunciation, or "BBC English")

is likely to feel a near-zero burden of CR, reinforced by the inclination among English-speakers, including speakers of North American Standard English, to accept RP as a desirable norm, and to take on the onus of comprehension and intelligibility.

Following is an attempt to visualize the notion of BCR.

Figure 1. BCR (Burden of Communicative Responsibility vis-à-vis speakers of Standard English)



The notion of BCR may help to establish more clearly the context in which the observations of managers and executives, and later the comments of employees, can be understood and interpreted. It should be noted, however, that although the presence of speakers of U.K. RP makes the cline in the setting in question more complex than it might otherwise be in New York, the principle of the likely existence of a differential BCR, based on an individual's native language and resultant interlanguage, seems to me to be valid even when as few as two speech communities are involved (viz. North American Standard English and Spanish-based ESL interlanguage.) Let me add to this that numerous permutations are possible: not only might age and gender play a role, but so would relative status at the workplace. Also important are attitudes toward the native languages of the interlocutors: a low-status native speaker of a prestige language, such as

French, might carry a lighter BCR than would a high-status speaker of Cantonese, vis-à-vis the same Standard English-speaking interlocutor, in New York City.

Taking all that I had heard and observed into consideration, following the sessions with managers, my hunch was that what was needed was a systematic program for the enhancement of language skills, designed to be population-specific in order to meet the needs of Company's people, possibly using Company's materials and situations as instructional media.

Next steps

Having listened to the listeners, as it were, the next step was to listen to the speakers in context, using natural observation to identify the features of language use which seemed to cause miscommunication. It was arranged for me to meet with those ESL speakers who would be willing to chat with me regarding their perceptions of the role played by language differences in their professional lives. Indeed, a survey on job satisfaction which had been conducted by the Personnel Department indicated that some employees felt blocked in their career paths because of "poor communication skills" or "accent." It was essential to have input from employees on their perceptions of themselves as communicators along vertical and horizontal lines. Valuable insight could be gained from an open exchange of views, if an atmosphere of personal security and mutual regard could be established.

Meeting employees

Company's prior demographic and attitude survey had indicated that a number of employees saw English as important in the work context, in connection with productivity and promotion. The meeting with managers indicated more than twenty identifiable problems in communication between native and non-native speakers of English, with implications for efficient company operations, customer service, and inter-office relations. An in-house communiqué had suggested that some thirty-five employees might benefit considerably from

a program of ESL skills development.

This was the picture when I met with the first group of six employees of diverse language backgrounds: India/Mahaolo, India/Hindi, Egypt/Arabic, Ethiopia/Amharic, Haiti/French Creole. The group responded readily to an opportunity to openly discuss what we all called "language problems", but as the discussion proceeded it became clear that their view of the situation did not exactly coincide with that of the managers. The employees raised the following major points:

1. Some employees saw themselves as competent speakers facing problematic listeners, but they acknowledged that the burden of intelligibility tended to fall on the speaker (themselves.)

2. Some saw the work they did as not emphasizing spoken English.

3. Granted that there might be some oral "stumbling blocks" in the English of some employees, they wondered if anything could be done about the problem.

4. Cultural differences, as much as language, affected the way some employees related to others at similar and higher levels in the company.

5. Personal qualities, such as shyness and reticence, were magnified for some individuals in a second-language situation, compounding problems in communication.

Thus, ambivalent feelings emerged. The employees knew that their own English was flawed in certain ways, but they felt that the term "language problems" might be a mask for negative attitudes, and that the burden of intelligibility was falling too heavily on them. Nevertheless, they were eager to take advantage of any opportunity to improve their spoken English - while having some doubts about the possibility of effectively treating the problem.

As we exchanged views, it was pointed out in relation to their points 1 and 2 that communicative competence in English is generally required for the discussion of work completed and to be done, and for interaction with managers and peers, even if the job description itself did not seem to call for language proficiency per se. The problem raised in point 4, culture conflict, would need to be approached directly or indirectly (through materials and activities) in any program envisaged. Point 3, the treatment of anomalies in spoken English, would

be the main focus of a program; through progress in this area, reduced communication apprehension and increased self-confidence (point 5) would most likely occur. There is a general assumption that personality and emotional state affect the clarity of articulation; but, as Acton (1984) states, "...the converse is also true: speakers can control their nerves or inner states by speaking properly," and he refers to the need to accept the idea that "pronunciation both affects and is affected by one's internal state (temporarily or permanently)", (p. 75).

All the speakers at the first session were comprehensible; their problems were in accuracy and acceptability. Phonology was the major concern, especially intonation patterns which made continuous discourse hard to grasp, even though vocabulary and grammar were basically correct. Some speakers had problems with such function words as articles and prepcsitions, resulting in utterances that lacked precision and could bring non-apposite responses. Noone in the group displayed problems in aural comprehension, although the conversation was nuanced, and the discussion was complex. As only 20% of the ESL employee population was able to attend the first session, another one was planned. Furthermore, it was noted that no Hispanic employees had attended, and this left an important gap in the input gathered because Hispanics are numerous in the company, were among the problematic communicators mentioned previously, and had formed a noticeable proportion of those respondents to the company's survey who had reported feelings of disaffection which might be related to language differences.

After this first meeting with employees, all of whom expressed eagerness to participate in any program that might be offered, we tentatively suggested a program of language workshops, open to all interested Company personnel with no limit on number of participants or on level of English proficiency. What was important was that the workshops be conducted on a specified working day, for the following reasons: the allocation of working-day time would be an indication of the company's seriousness of intent and of its expectation of progress; also,

working-day scheduling would insure accessibility of the program to the employees, attesting to Company's recognition of the many demands on their time faced by employees after working hours, including other courses of study, and by inference, of Company's genuine interest in the well-being of the employees.

When I reflected on the two meetings that had taken place, and contemplated the one that was to come, one conclusion virtually formed itself: the "complaints" of the managers, the so-called listeners, were far more numerous and detailed than were the comments of the employees, the so-called speakers. Looking at the situation from the managers' point of view, one could say that the ESL speakers did not know how disconcerting and irritating their English was; looking at the situation from the employees' point of view, one could say that language problems were not grave, and that what was needed was more effort, understanding, and good will on the part of the listeners. Attitudes were clearly involved, but attitudes are not amenable to direct intervention; language use <u>is</u> susceptible to change, and the consequent feeling was that by approaching communication problems from the outside in, i.e. by giving employees the opportunity to modify and improve their English, changes on the inside of the communication process, in attitudes among interlocutors, could be effected.

<u>Filling in the gaps</u>

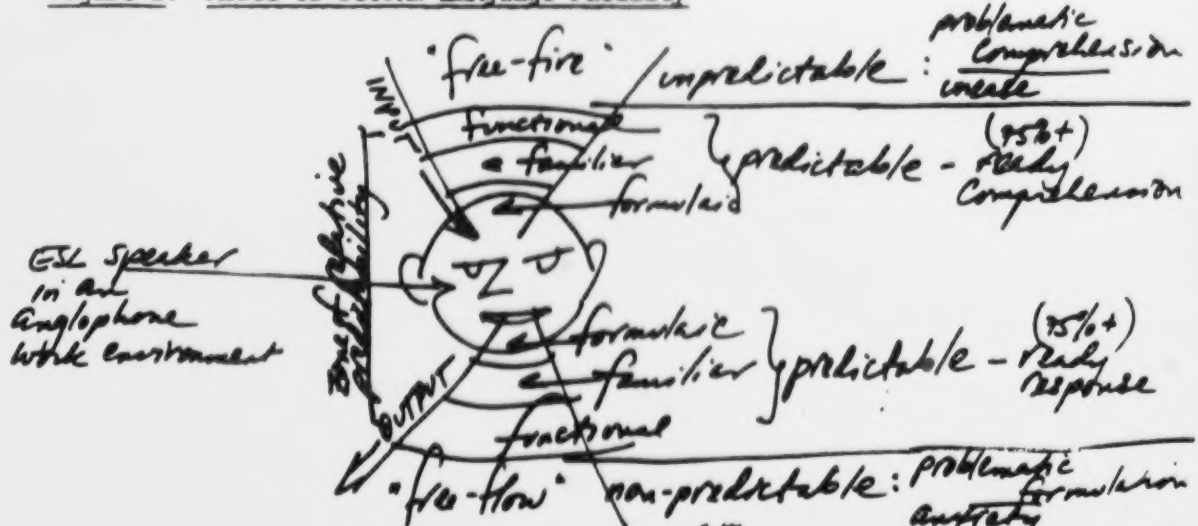
Fourteen people attended the second session, of whom half were Spanish-speakers from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. This group acknowledged problems in interpersonal communication due to "accents", fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and impatience on the part of upper-level personnel. They believed that certain prejudices were at work in the promotion, or non-promotion, process, but were willing, even eager, to focus on language as a means of overcoming obstacles. The group was primarily concerned with the questions of if and how language change could be effected. To demonstrate what might be achieved, I began to write down and analyze utterances as they occurred, noting word "amputation" (suppressed consonants), dropped inflections, mispronounced

vowels, and other anomalies. There was a good deal of interest and excitement as participants began to identify and classify potentially confusing features in their own and others' speech. This atmosphere of constructive criticism led some individuals to cite instances in which they had experienced difficulty in speaking or understanding on the telephone, in receiving instructions, in posing questions, and in making requests. Several employees mentioned their feelings of embarrassment at having to request more than one repetition, or to repeat their own utterances more than once. Several also mentioned their reluctance to engage in conversation that was not directly related to a task at hand, and a few people acknowledged that socializing, at lunch or coffee breaks, was limited to their contacts with a few compatriots among the employee population.

Thus, both management and the employees themselves had concurred on an important point: often talk about work, even if it involved a complex vocabulary, was easier to carry on than talk about the vicissitudes of everyday life, yet the ability to talk with colleagues and others about everyday life is an important part of creating a productive ambience for work.

The input I had gathered in my meetings and observations at Company has inspired this visualization of the communication problem facing many ESL speakers in the workplace:

Figure 2. Model of Second Language Facility



The model attempts to account for a kind of hierarchy of workplace speech acts with a corresponding cline of communicative competence. This means that, in effect, the ESL speaker/listener will most readily use and comprehend English language that is predictable: first, formulaic expressions, then familiar topical exchanges with familiar persons, then functional, job-related language. Problems arise in direct ratio to the absence of predictability (in situation, context, interlocutor, topic), in what we call the "free-fire" zone of random input from random individuals, and the "free-flow" zone of utterances that need to be produced readily in order to maintain social interaction. Uneasiness in the "free-fire, free-flow" zones generates communication apprehension, which McCroskey (1977) defines as a state of mind in which "apprehension about participating in communication outweighs any projection of gain from communicating in a given situation." This anxiety causes people to be reticent, or even remain totally silent, in situations which seem to demand verbal contributions. This problem was cited by managerial personnel at the first meeting; it was implied by the first group of employees, and confirmed by the second.

If an in-house language skills development program were to be offered, its design would need to factor in the reduction of communication apprehension in "free-fire, free-flow" situations, by allocating time for conversation or discussion on topics totally unrelated to work. At this point, we could envisage program objectives on two levels for Company's ESL employees:

macro-level: clear, confident oral expression in English, in the workplace and in the larger community;

micro-level: changes in the speaker's articulatory patterns in English, to optimize intelligibility and gain positive feedback.

In talking, confidence is the corollary of clarity. Confidence in oneself as a second-language speaker is the product of the speaker's own perception of changes in his speech patterns, reinforced by positive feedback from his anglophone interlocutors.

For example, in Hispanic speakers, micro-level changes would involve phonemic features, such as the elimination of such substitutions as /ch/ for /sh/, /ng/ for /n/, /b/ for /v/, etc., avoidance of word "amputation", correction of such vowel shifts as eat for it, it for eat, etc. For Arabic speakers, micro-level changes would include attention to basic structures such as articles (a, an, the), which are often omitted in English because they are not explicit in the native language. For speakers of Indian, West Indian, and African varieties of English, micro-level changes would be brought about in intonation patterns; many misunderstandings and miscues arise because speakers of different varieties of English place word stress differently than do speakers of U.S. and U.K. standard dialects. The one speaker of Cantonese in the employee group would need to gain control of the phonemes /l/, /r/, and /n/, as well as intonation patterns and the distorting effect of Asian tonality on spoken English.

Organizing a program

Company decided to go ahead on an in-house program, under the aegis of their Training Department. Based on their experience with instruction in various aspects of company operations, Training set a limit of twelve participants in the program, enrolled on a first-come, first-served basis, with the promise of repeat programs to satisfy an apparently growing demand. An eight-week program was planned, consisting of eight weekly three-hour sessions. As it was imperative that the program be population-specific, in order for it to be as effective as possible within a limited time period, good diagnostic procedures would be a sine qua non. To get a fix on individual problems, and to develop that data into a matrix of cruciality for the indigenous (to Company) population, we decided to pre-test in several ways:

1. accent inventory (viz. Prator and Robinett, Manual of American English Pronunciation
2. dyadic interviews and impromptu reports
3. recognition-of-errors exercise (speech and print)
4. listening/dictation (aural comprehension, spelling, vocabulary)

(An ultimate post-test would parallel these activities.)

As for the course itself, it was evident the limited eight-week program would require careful planning. In order to make the most of each session, a specific phonological focus would be set for every meeting. As natural speech is a mix of elements, and no speaker confines himself to a single sound or structure when he talks, our approach would be recursive, always responsive to what was actually taking place in oral communication, and circling back for review and revision as necessary. We arrived at a tentative sequence:

1. Diagnostics: problems of the speaker, problems of the listener
2. The sounds of U. S. Standard English: an overview. How your mouth works
3. Stress and unstress: words, sentences, discourse
4. Crucial consonants: all-important word endings, "amputation"
5. Stigmatized forms in oral and written English: what the ESL speaker/writer must identify and control
6. Powerful vowels: substitutions that confuse the listener
7. Sound and spelling: useful patterns and guidelines
8. Balancing speed and accuracy in speaking English: "blending" to conserve meaning; oral communication under pressure.

The materials to be used would include:

a book: Prator & Robinett's Manual of American English Pronunciation, mainly for work at home; audio tapes made by the instructor for practice by students, made by students for self-analysis; student-created dialogues and role-play scenarios; transcripts of tapes into worksheets; Company realia; additional materials as appropriate.

Recognizing that the use of English in informal settings and situations throughout the work week was an important part of the program, the Personnel Department would plan lunchtime gatherings which would enable, or at least encourage, employees to overcome some of the inhibitions they had mentioned. There were hopes that "spin-offs" would emerge naturally from the core of planned activities.

The tentative sequence indicated above was transformed into a course outline, as required. This rather cursory plan was transformed in the reality into eight lively and productive sessions, ranging over many questions of language and cultures in contrast. Every session was replete with spontaneous exchanges of views and anecdotes, yet the plan was followed, with the exception of session

No. 7, which developed as a workshop in intercultural communication. Language was always in use for real communication, and participants felt free to cite each other's errors (an important step in recognizing and correcting their own.) The first group of twelve included several nationalities: Puerto Rico, Haiti, Egypt, Hong Kong, Ethiopia, and India. Although there was individualized attention and instruction on the linguistic level, the group's own dynamic produced an esprit de corps which carried over into subsequent plans, culminating in an informal gathering at my home, four weeks after the program officially ended.

The employees attended the gathering with their spouses and children. They had cooked a variety of national dishes, so that the refreshments formed an international buffet. However, the gathering was not only an agreeable social occasion, it was an important pedagogical event, for the presence of the spouses, along with members of my own family, provided a group of naive interlocutors, so to speak, with whom our group could interact informally, testing out their communicative competence in a real-world, social situation, in line with the goals of the program.

The gathering thus functioned as an "exit test" for a program which had been geared to improving the intelligibility, interpersonal skills, and personal confidence of its participants. Of course, an oral post-test had been administered at the closing session, but this occasion, some three and a half weeks later, enabled me to note the carry-over of instruction and practice beyond the confines of the office classroom into the demanding setting of a real-world social situation.

Company's management questioned the participants about the nature of the program and its eventual benefits, or the lack of them. According to Company's findings, all the participants (except the one who dropped out early on, for scheduling reasons) claimed to have benefited significantly from the experience. Answering questions (some of which I had helped to formulate), they claimed to have a clearer understanding of how English works as a system of sounds and word order, an increased awareness of the contrasts between the way they used

English and the norms and expectations of native speakers, and a sense of the features that they needed to continue to work on. The employees said that they felt they had improved in their spoken English because they seemed to be getting more positive feedback from co-workers and superiors. This seemed to result in an enhancement of self-confidence, and increased willingness to communicate interpersonally in English. All of these factors would underlie the more profound improvement which could only come about through practice, expanded contacts, and wider experience.

Conclusions

To draw a useful conclusion from this report, we need to go back to the beginning. The project was undertaken because the management of a company found itself on the horns of a dilemma: they had in their employ a number of competent people whose progress was blocked, and whose efficiency was impaired, because their oral English caused problems for the people they worked with or the customers they served; should the company attempt to deal with the language problem, or find ways to replace the problematic employees? And, given the demographics of the employee pool in New York, could replacements be found who would not present similar problems? This company, for reasons as much pragmatic as altruistic, decided to act. Most companies do not, although necessity may impel more employers into the inclusion of language instruction as part of their regular training programs in the future.

Meanwhile, ESL college students, like their native-speaker peers, are venturing into the business world in growing numbers. The implications for designers of curriculum and instruction are clear: as English for Special Purposes becomes a growing element in the preparation of pedagogy and materials, we need to consider oral communication in the business world as the proper concern of ESL theoreticians and practitioners. The beneficiaries of our efforts to move in that direction will be the students whose aspirations are the guidelines for our endeavors.

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Date Filmed

March 29, 1991